Richard Campanella's GEOGRAPHIES OF NEW ORLEANS

In service of the king

Mobile, New Orleans and Carnival: An alternative take on a perennial question

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Where did American Mardi Gras originate, in Mobile or near New Orleans?

If you've heard that question before, you probably know that that answer depends on semantics: whether one means the first mention of Mardi Gras, the first celebration, the first parade; if it occurred in or near the city, specifically on Fat Tuesday, and whether primary sources can be found.

Such perennial questions are often more meaningful in their framing than their responses — which never seem to settle the matter, and which you will not find in this article.

I offer an alternative take on that question: Why we would expect a cultural trait like Mardi Gras to have originated in either Mobile or in New Orleans, when those colonial settlements were virtually two peas in a pod — founded by people of the same culture and religion, working on the same project, in service of the same king?

PHOTO BY JOSH BRASTED

Rex, King of Carnival Lynes R. "Poco" Sloss, and Sarah Jane Freeman address each other at the Mystick Krewe of Comus Ball at the Marriot Hotel in 2018.

Sister cities

Consider the cultural commonalities. Both cities were founded by the same man (Bienville), whose brother Iberville had established the Louisiana colony. Both Mobile (established in 1702 and relocated in 1711) and New Orleans (founded in 1718, in a region explored regularly since 1699) would serve as capital of Louisiana, led by the same governor answering to the same officials in Paris.

Colonists shuttled back and forth regularly between the two places, sailing coastwise from Mobile Bay up the Mississippi River, else into Lake Pontchartrain and Bayou St. John. In fact, some Mobile colonists settled briefly on Bayou St. John in 1708, lofting the improbable notion that Mobilians lived here ten years before New Orleanians did.

Colonists, of course, were not the first to traverse coastal Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. So many Indigenous tribes

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and bands did so prehistorically that they termed the present-day New Orleans area Balbancha, meaning "land of many tongues." One tribe was the Mobile Indians, and the pidgin they spoke here is known today as Mobilian Jargon.

Designing the cities of Mobile and New Orleans also entailed the same set of colonists. The surveyor who had laid out Mobile's streets in 1711, Jacques Barbizon de Pailloux, likely also surveyed the original baseline for New Orleans in 1718. Engineer Adrian de Pauger, who designed the French Quarter in 1722, also did mapping and engineering in Mobile. Both cities ended up with a Rue Conti, a Rue Dauphin, and a Rue Royale, as well as fortifications following the designs of the same French engineer, Sébastien Vauban.

Early architecture was nearly identical in both cities, houses having cross-timbered walls and steep hipped roofs. Both cities built Catholic churches in the heart of their communities, both of which would come to serve parishes, become archdioceses, and continue in their downtown locations today.

The famous "casquette (casket) girls," young French women brought to the colony to create family unions, came to Mobile in 1704 before arriving at New Orleans in 1728. Infamously, victims of the Middle Passage were brought in from the same Senegambian region of West Africa, and were enslaved in both cities according to the same Code Noir (Black Code).

Similar things may be said of Biloxi, Natchez, and Natchitoches: these early French settlements were envisioned as cogs in the same colonial machine, not isolated outposts operating independently. Geographically, of

AP FILE PHOTO BY JAY REEVES

The last float in a Mardi Gras parade passes by a throng in Mobile, Ala., in 2022.

course, they are located far apart, but if we view them as a cultural Venn diagram, they overlapped substantially. Commonalities trumped differences, and one of those commonalities was Mardi Gras.

As the founding generation gave way to locally born people, both New Orleans and Mobile developed Creole cultures, and French-speaking Creoles would dominate the two cities for decades to come. Both places had prominent populations of free people of color, and attracted immigrants and domestic migrants.

The duality would continue through the nineteenth century, as people and culture moved daily between the two ports on steam packets plying coastal waters, and starting in 1869, on the New Orleans, Mobile & Texas Railroad. So closely linked were the two cities that the New Orleans press often used the phrase "our sister city of Mobile."

The result is visible in the streetscape. Go to parts of Dauphin Street in downtown Mobile, and they look quite similar to our Dauphine Street in the French Quarter. Oakleigh Garden Historic District around Washington Square is the equivalent of our Garden District, around Washington Avenue.

Go to Government Street in Mobile and you will see Barton Academy, designed by James Gallier and Charles Dakin in the same style they used for the famous St. Charles Hotel on our St. Charles Avenue. And if you visited either city in the mid-1800s, you would have noticed a majestic Merchants Exchange — both designed by Gallier and Dakin, both with a landmark dome, and both on each city's Royal Street.

An arbitrary notion

Given all these cultural commonalities, it seems rather arbitrary that we should pluck out one particular trait — Mardi Gras — and presuppose that it popped up in one city before the other. Focusing on who was "first" obfuscates important concepts of how culture diffuses and evolves, and instead views Mardi Gras as if it were independently invented. It was not.

Consider alternately that Mardi Gras came bundled with many other Catholic and secular traditions, and expressed itself variously wherever French settlers set down roots in colonial Louisiana — particular in its two largest cities, Mobile and New Orleans.

Sometimes the pre-Lenten feast might have been merely noted, as Iberville did in his ship journals on March 3, 1699; other times it might have been toasted privately but not documented, or celebrated publicly but hardly in an organized manner, like a parade. Mardi Gras likely emerged at multiple locations in our region, wherever its bearers brought their culture, and whenever midwinter came around on the calendar. It took many forms, and only occasionally left surviving records.

So why do we keep debating who was first?

For one, documentation does matter, and primary records of early carnivals are critical to the understanding our modern celebration — even as we can hardly expect this, of all feasts, to have left behind paperwork.

Another reason involves the appeal of trivia in topics of popular interest. Trivia questions tend to favor pat answers and pithy superlatives — "the first," "the largest," "the only," "the last" — which, being easy to remember, tend to get repeated ad nauseam.

And then there is civic rivalry. New Orleans, being on the continental-scale Mississippi River, grew much larger than Mobile. Its Mardi Gras celebration grew commensurately — thanks in large part to the introduction of organized krewes and parades by a group of Mobilians who started the Krewe of Comus in 1857.

Feeling that their younger, bigger sister had grabbed the limelight for a feast they celebrated just as much, Mobilians took pains to point out exactly that — that their Mardi Gras had its bona fides, with documents to back them up. New Orleanians responded in kind, and the debate continued, becoming a midwinter ritual in and of itself.

So, did American Mardi Gras originate in Mobile or in New Orleans?

I offer my pat and pithy answer: "Yes."

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